

The message of Eid-e-Miladunnabi

A timeless guideline for humanity

AS we observe Eid-e-Miladunnabi, we do it with extraordinary fervour and profound respect for the life, works and teachings of the Holy Prophet (pbuh). Today we also re-instil his ideals and resolve to realize them as far as possible in our temporal and spiritual lives.

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) has not only established a religion, but left behind a rich legacy of statecraft. It's a legacy of Islamic faith, brotherhood and equality of all humankind underpinning peaceful and harmonious co-existence between communities. Through praying five times daily, distributing alms, fasting, performing the Hajj and foremost adhering to the teachings of the prophet we fulfil the obligations enjoined upon the Muslims. The propensity today for being religious seems to be for rewards only but without being ritualistic we must imbibe the true spirit of Islam.

Islam literally means peace and therefore has no place for violence and intolerance in the lives of Muslims. Our solemn pledge for this year's Eid-e-Miladunnabi is to cultivate and practice tolerance, avoid conflicts and establish peace, and live in harmony with peoples of other faith in accord with the spiritual wisdom of our Holy Prophet (pbuh).

It is important that steadfast pursuit of our religion with all its spiritual values be our goal. Exploitation of religion for political gain should be consciously avoided, if we are to demonstrate our love and respect for the Prophet of Islam (pbuh).

End of blockade

BNP should reassess its method of agitation

THANK heavens and the BNP that it has announced an indefinite end to hartals and blockade from yesterday. We would hope that this will be permanent. We want to believe that the decision stems from the awareness that the idea of blockade is totally destructive for the country and counterproductive for the party.

We fully understand the opposition's need to articulate its grievances and express dissent but we cannot concur with the method that has been employed by the BNP for doing that. The violence in the name of oborodh and hartal has taken a very heavy toll of human lives, private and public property and on the economy as a whole, not to speak of the political mileage the BNP has lost as a result of this. It is the people and the economy that must come first for any political party. The extent that the common man had to suffer in terms of loss of livelihood, in the last two months in particular, makes such programmes anti-people.

We believe too that time has come for the opposition to reassess its method of expressing dissent because what we have seen so far does not meet the definition of political programmes. And just as we will move forcefully with the government to engage with the opposition in a meaningful dialogue to address the issue of a fully participatory election so do we with equal force move with the opposition to be more judicious in selecting the method of political agitation, certainly to shun the path of violence.

Rejoicing the record FX reserve

FAARIA TASIN

THE country making a record foreign exchange reserve has surely not escaped our attention. Typically, it is advisable for a country to maintain a foreign exchange reserve which is equivalent to three-month's import bill. In Bangladesh, this is approximately US\$9 billion; so when the country's forex reserve became sturdy enough to finance six months of future import bills equal to a staggering US\$18 billion, it was definitely a time to celebrate.

Many may raise questions regarding why would more money coming into the economy be unfavorable for the system? However, it is important to take the overall macroeconomic scenario into account to understand the true valuation of a high forex reserve.

The first advantage which the country could have taken out of this accruing foreign exchange reserve is through increased investment. The relationship is fairly simple: if Bangladesh is to increase its GDP growth rate, one of the key ways is through increased investment. For the past few years, investment is hovering around 25 percent of GDP. Most macroeconomic plans envisage the country to reach investment to GDP ratios of over 30 percent; these plans also stipulate that the lion's share of investment will come from the private sector.

The accumulating forex reserve would have been a dream come true for investors unfortunately, this was not to be. The ongoing political situation deters many investors to take on new projects or expand existing ones. The private sector credit growth in October 2013 was only 11.04% compared to a December 2013 target of 15.5%. The current forex reserve would have provided an excellent opportunity for investors to purchase machinery and technology from abroad, however the uncertainty encompassing the political scenario restricts investors to calculate the depths of their risks. We can argue that a situation like this can represent a lack of domestic demand.

When there is an inflow of foreign exchange (dollars) in the country, the supply of it rises consequently reducing its price. The central bank buys the dollars in exchange of taka in order to keep the taka from appreciating against the dollar, normally done to support the export sector. In the past, this had led to a rise in money supply and inflation. Though the central bank's prudent actions has reduced inflation however there still remains a risk of inflation due to underutilised forex reserve.

A high forex reserve reduces the probability of financial distress and lessens sovereign default risk but it is important for the country to utilise it properly to reap the maximum benefits.

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Zen and the art of elections in BD: The sound of one hand clapping

AHRAR AHMAD

THE recently concluded elections in Bangladesh has an almost surreal quality to it. There were several features about them that were as fascinating as they were unique.

First, it was an election without electors. As everyone must know by now, only 11 out of 41 registered parties participated in the polls; 153 out of 300 seats were declared uncontested (even the President, the PM, the Speaker of the Parliament, the Leader of the Opposition or the Chief Election Commissioner could not cast their votes); and the pattern of voting appeared to be odd, with abrupt and inexplicable surges in polling activity towards the end of the day. Compared to the usual enthusiasm for voting demonstrated by Bangladeshis (in the last election, the participation rate was almost 87%), the turnout in this election was abysmal, and the "mandate" provided to the ruling party most dubious.

Second, this was an election without election campaigns, and a Parliament without a meaningful opposition. Most of the parties that participated in the polls had essentially belonged to the same alliance, and reflected a vote-sharing arrangement rather than electoral competition. Almost all the parties that won seats in the parliament (except for two with one member each) have been rewarded with ministerial appointments. Given the fact that the party of the current Leader of the Opposition is also part of the Cabinet, it is clear that any opposition in the Parliament will, at best, have only token presence and little significance.

Third, the election was certainly constitutional but hardly democratic. The Awami League (AL) had steadfastly maintained that it had to hold the elections to satisfy constitutional requirements, and has conceded that another may be held soon. This fierce fidelity to the constitution, particularly one it had conveniently amended, regardless of what kind of an election we can have, or whether democratic norms were being respected, reminds one of Gen. Westmoreland's memorable justification about the need to destroy a Vietnamese village in order to save it.

Fourth, this was an election without issues. The Election Manifesto of the AL was published only a week before the elections. Since the document is supposed to indicate the principles, promises, policies, priorities and visions of the party, it was obvious that NONE of those factors was considered important enough to be actually placed before the people for their consideration and judgment. Similarly, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) raised no issues of national interest. Instead of seizing on the considerable vulnerabilities of the AL regime (massive corruption, violations of the rule of law, governmental incompetence, foreign policy failures, and so on), the party chose to fixate on the PM. It was willing to moderate its stance on the Caretaker Government, but not on tolerating her.

Fifth, and following along the same theme, this was an election about shadowy enemies and grotesque caricatures. The AL appeared to run against the Jamaat, a party that could not even contest in this election and had received less than 5% of the vote in 1991 and 1996. It slyly politicised the War Crimes Trial, and under the slogan of *muktijuddher chetana* (the consciousness of the Liberation War) proceeded to demonise the opposition for being Pakistani/Saudi stooges, religious militants, and anti-independence traitors.

The BNP, for its part, shrewdly played the India card and seemed to be running against a foreign country. Helped by India's tone-deafness regarding the nationalist aspirations and sensitivities of Bangladeshis, the BNP posed alarmist questions about jeopardising our sovereignty by surrendering to India's hegemonic designs. Its associates (like the Hefazot-e-Islam), decried the moral decadence, and the dangers, of secular fundamentalism.

Consequently, if we believe our leaders, there are no authentic or patriotic Bangladeshis in the country anymore. They are either Razakars and Islamic extremists tied to external forces, or they are anti-Islamic Indian *dalals*, both of whom have made the Faustian bargain to sell their souls, and their country, to one or the other of the equally despicable options.

Sixth, this was an election that signified colossal failures – moral for the AL and political for the BNP. Through its dogmatic insistence on holding the polls according to the predetermined schedule, in not allowing political space for the opposition to function (indeed, its reckless use of party loyalists and the instruments of the State to hound and

harass the opposition), its influence over the Election Commission, its taunting, at times, vulgar, rhetoric even in Parliament, the party besmirched its image and its honour.

For the BNP a series of tactical missteps led it to lose face and public trust. It maintained its program of *hartals* and blockades with its accompanying violence and vandalism, disruptions and anxieties, with a relentless single-mindedness that indicated a callous indifference to the safety of the people or the well-being of the country. Its March for Democracy stumbled because AL out-hustled and out-muscled it, and sputtered when Begum Zia spoke to the press from the steps of her house (while she could not go to the meeting, the opportunity to present her case came to her, but she could not use that prospect very effectively). Her son's stentorian message from the comforts and safety of London to exhort the people to rush to the movement at any cost and not wait for any signs and signals, was unnecessarily provocative and probably alienating. The leadership of the BNP remained conflicted, its relationship with Jamaat confused, its message garbled.

Finally, this was an election that, instead of strengthening our democracy, exposed its fragility. Democracy is ultimately about the transition from power to authority – the first is arbitrary, centralised and unrestrained, the second is limited in scope, diffuse and has a moral component associated with it. The first is based on fear and manipulation, the second depends on consensus and legitimacy. The first is direct, naked and personal. The second is mediated, rule-based and institutional. The first is indifferent to consequences. The second is defined by them. The first is secured through cunning and force, the second through ensuring popular sovereignty through free, participatory, credible elections.

The challenge for Bangladesh is not about tinkering with electoral procedure but about radically transforming the political culture, not dueling with quixotic windmills but grappling with fundamental problems, not a choice between this Begum and that, but about problematising the master narrative.

But elections in Bangladesh are merely a ruse, a temporary ritual, a cynical game, a clash of egos and interests rather than that of ideas and visions. It merely provides the opportunity to choose which cluster of rulers (and their dependent clientele) will exploit the resources and protections of the states they seek to benefit themselves. The leaders use the election to acquire the legal validation of "authority", and immediately resort to exerting "power" in the traditional sense. In the process, and for opportunistic reasons, they muddy the political environment. They debate Bangladesh's history (who declared independence, was BKSAL worse than the indemnity act, who allied with whom at what time, and so on) rather than Bangladesh's future. They use the rhetoric of threats and ultimatums with the stated objective of crushing the opposition, rather than the language of tolerance and trust with the intention of working with them. They peddle paranoia, conspiracies, and fantasies, rather than engage with real issues and solutions. The hyper-polarisation we see in the body politic is manufactured, mischievous, and dangerous. It fools the people and dooms the country.

The challenge for Bangladesh is not about tinkering with electoral procedure but about radically transforming the political culture, not dueling with quixotic windmills but grappling with fundamental problems, not a choice between this Begum and that, but about problematising the master narrative. Until we are able to do that, the hapless people of Bangladesh will be condemned to suffer the leadership it does not need, nor deserve.

The title is taken from Robert Pirsig's classic, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.
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TRIBUTE

The passing of the renaissance man

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

ON a monsoon evening twenty years ago, Syed Ali Kabir and Muhammad Habibur Rahman reflected on politics, on literature and on the Bengali way of life as it had come down through the generations. The dying sounds of an afternoon rain, in the form of a drizzle, lent their conversation a poignancy that the third individual present there, he being yours truly, did not fail to miss. It was an evening when the intellect was at work, in Ali the banker and Rahman the interpreter of the law.

Syed Ali Kabir has been dead a good many years.



Muhammad Habibur Rahman passed into the ages a few evenings ago, at a time when his moral presence was a paramount need for this country. Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman's life had consistently been based on the principle that there was forever a purpose to living. Like so many of his profession, indeed so many elsewhere, he could have retired into the sunset and waited patiently for the end to come. He did not, even when his study, interpretation and application of the law as a judge, as indeed the chief justice of the Supreme Court, drew to a close. In the revolution of the turns history often takes, a new calling came to him. For three months, it became his moral and judicial responsibility to reassure the nation that he was there to get politics moving again. He was chief advisor of the caretaker government, a job that claimed every fibre of energy in him, every bit of his wisdom if he meant to leave a legacy behind. He succeeded brilliantly. That was in June 1996.

In his final eighteen years, as also in the times prior to that, Justice Rahman did not let go of the roots that clutch. He was a Bengali, a truth he never dissociated himself from.

And to that end, he pursued literature, the study of it, in all the earnestness of scholarly endeavour. He delved deep into Tagore, into the poetry and the songs and everything else about the poet, to emerge with newer interpretations of Bengal's pre-eminent bard. Culture, he appeared to be informing himself, was what sustained society. And in that process of sustenance, he knew he had a role to play. It was, in a certain way, a reminder of another judge, another interpreter of the law, who once went out on a limb to remind Bengalis that culture was all. Justice Syed Mahbub Murshed, in all his refinement of wisdom and courage, sent out the loud message in 1961 that Tagore was Bengal's essence. There was no turning back after that.

That is the legacy Habibur Rahman took charge of in his times. And then he saw beyond Tagore. He went into detailed analyses and interpretations of the Quran, without any prejudice to himself or to others. A truly secular being, Rahman seemed to be suggesting, is one who understands history, who knows the ways of the world, who lives his faith without undermining the beliefs of others. His readings of the Quran apart, there were his studies of religions not his own that gave his personality a roundness one associates with the world of literary undertakings. And then there was more. He went into careful studies of poetry in languages beyond his own, indeed beyond those characteristic of the subcontinent, and went to huge lengths to transcribe and translate them for his fellow Bengalis.

Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman's was a spirit of renaissance. Scholars do not go on leave or settle back in self-satisfaction. For Rahman, it was not merely life that defined him. It was he who decided, in the infinity of his wisdom, what path to knowledge and its many dimensions his life would take. He travelled back in time, to return with a rich chronology of generational times as it defined the progression of Bengali society and politics. His research in the field of the evolution of the Bengali language was a demonstration of the expansive mind working in him. In Ekushey, he perceived the colours of the rainbow.

Muhammad Habibur Rahman was given to bursts of natural humour, just as the late Justice M.R. Kayani was. If Kayani could keep his audience glued to the pearls of wisdom shooting forth from him, Rahman could hold his listeners wrapped in the intellectual wit that informed his being.

Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman's secular credentials lent dignity to us all. His courage – like the courage of Justice Syed Mohammad Hussain, Justice K.M. Subhan, Justice Abdur Rahman Chowdhury – was a spark to living, ours.

The renaissance man has gone silent. And so has the world he injected so much energy into in his lifetime.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Why India supports this election

Ignoring protests and pleas of the people from all walks of life not to hold the January 5 general election, in which major political parties did not participate, the government made it clear how little it cares for the country.

The US, UK, Canada and commonwealth have termed the election "disappointing" as more than half of the seats were uncontested and the remaining ones showed only token opposition. They are dissatisfied with the way the poll was held and called the new government to immediately engage in dialogue to find a way for holding a new election that is free, fair, credible, peaceful and truly participatory.

But India is the exception. It said that it was a "constitutional requirement." In the Liberation War of 1971, India helped us and we are grateful for it. We thought that it extended a helping hand towards a neighbour in distress, but now we have ground to think otherwise... India had its own agenda.

India made it a point to support the party which serves its interests.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

BNP tarnishing its image

Of late everyone including other nations is urging BNP to cut off its alliance with Jamaat. The BNP argues that Awami League (AL) took Jamaat's support in 1991 and 1996. Please note that this was before 9/11. Before 9/11 most Islamic groups including Jamaat were not considered extremist groups. I would like to add that the BNP is tarnishing its own image by calling indefinite blockades and hartals.

Aminur Rahim
New DOHS
Mohakhali, Dhaka

Schools burnt on law-enforcers' watch

I, as a teacher shudder to even imagine that only a day before the election, a number of schools, serving as polling centers, were burnt to ashes by the so-called miscreants. Undoubtedly, this is a very serious matter to be concerned with.

I just can't understand how it happened at a time when our army was deployed in addition to our regular law and order forces to stop this kind of violence. Besides, there were party men round the clock to keep vigil. Is it not a failure on the part of the CEC and the government as well?

Zakia Islam
On e-mail

Comments on post editorial, "When a party loses its marbles . . .," published on January 08, 2014

Sam
This beautiful line encapsulates the problem of our politics: "If you cannot run your rival out of town through violent agitation on the streets, paint her in the colours of treason."

The fact that there are many good, decent, pious patriots in the Awami League or that the BNP is full of decorated freedom fighters is irrelevant to these extremists who don't care a whit about freedom or democracy or anything nobler than a capricious greed for unchecked power to line their pockets, as we have seen in the most recent wealth statements that they tried so hard to suppress.

Nero
So BNP's strategy is not working, they don't know history, law, and constitution... then why are you so bothered about them, my friend?

Waliul Haque Khondker
A masterpiece op-ed! It strikes the right cord with all the prudent readership. If the author recollects, during Pakistan days, whenever the people of the then eastern wing raised their voice against exploitation and injustice, there would be a clarion call by the Pakistani leadership and their cronies in the east saying, "Islam khatre mein hain!" Meaning, Islam is in danger!

Ezajur Rahman
Huh? A masterpiece? The country is full of men who hark back to 1971 as if they actually took up arms. The people of Bangladesh are fed up with the AL and BNP and the two netris. Only goons, fools and narcissists want them.

A freedom fighter
Wonderful analysis.

Ezajur Rahman
Only in Bangladesh do freedom fighters go around with 'freedom fighter' written on their business cards...